

## **“Disciples Wrestle with God and Faith” – Genesis 32:22-31 – October 20, 2019**

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The name Jacob means “the supplanter or the grasper.” And he lived up to that description. Someone once said that Jacob was the kind of guy that could enter a revolving door behind you, and come out ahead of you. A host of unpleasant words have been used to describe him: trickster, con artist, schemer, manipulator, double-talker. He wasn’t really a crook or a criminal; he just was clever enough to get his own way and so self-centered that he always looked out for number one...himself. The kind of guy, who, once he entered a room, looked for the back door in case he needed a quick get-away.

Jacob was in a bind. A rather big one. He was heading back home to face his brother, whom he had conned multiple times, and not only did he fear for his own life, but also for his large family. His apprehension grew after he had sent out some messengers to meet his brother, and they came back with the news that Esau was on the way with a party of about 400 men. To Jacob, that didn’t bode too well.

He took all his people and his household and divided it into two camps, thinking if Esau attacked one, the other could escape. And then Jacob began to pray. He admitted both his unworthiness and his fear. Remembering the promises God had given to him and to his grandfather Abraham, he asked for deliverance. Then he sent on ahead, a present to his brother, a number of various herd animals, hoping to appease his brother’s anger with these gifts. He did everything he could think of doing to prepare for this homecoming.

Having previously run from his problems, Jacob was finally willing to face them and suffer the consequences of previous wrongdoings. He was scared and rightly so. That night he took his immediate family and sent them across the river Jabbok. And he remained there, alone. Or so he thought.

With a lot on his mind, Jacob needed time to think, to prepare mentally for his reunion with his brother, and perhaps to work out a contingency plan. But that wasn’t to be. For out of the darkness came a rival, and all night these two wrestled on the riverbank. Neither ever seemed to gain advantage over the other. They appeared evenly matched.

Hours passed, and eventually it dawned on Jacob that this was no ordinary foe, but he refused to give in. In the past he had resorted to his cunning and trickery in order to succeed. Here on the bank of the Jabbok River, he discovered within himself a new strength. He found the stamina to stand against this power that had leapt on him from the darkness. For someone who had always run from a head-on confrontation, this time Jacob could only persist in the battle.

Finally the opponent demonstrated that he had the greater strength. He could have stopped the match at any time, yet for some reason, throughout the night, he had held back. But as dawn threatened to shatter the darkness, the antagonist decided to bring the contest to an end. He

simply touched Jacob's hip, and it was immediately put out of joint. Wounded, Jacob held on and refused to let go. The foe finally spoke, "Let me go, for the dawn is approaching." From what comes later, we know that this was God. The darkness was beginning to dissipate. Soon Jacob would be able to see his adversary. No human can look fully upon the face of God and live. So God was ending the struggle before the daylight came in order to protect Jacob.

Feeling perhaps that he finally had the upper hand, Jacob cried out, "Bless me first, then I'll let you go." He suspected that there was more to this enemy than he fully realized, so Jacob pleaded for a blessing.

The other said to him, "What is your name?" This wasn't just a simple request for identification. In the ancient world, to know someone's name was to have power over that person. A name was not just a tag or a label; it revealed one's inmost being. Jacob's name meant "one who grasps, one who supplants," and that had been his mark throughout his life. In making Jacob reveal his name, God was compelling him to expose his true self, to admit who he was, to confess how he had lived, to uncover his character. At this moment, Jacob was broken in both body and spirit, completely vulnerable before God.

God said to Jacob, "No longer will you be called Jacob, but now you are Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and you have prevailed." Throughout the Bible, when individuals are given new names, it signals a time of change and transition. Abram and Sarai became Abraham and Sarah when God called them out to be the ancestors of a great nation. Jesus gave Simon the name Peter, because he was to be the rock upon which the church would be built. On the Damascus Road, Saul's name became Paul, and he was the great apostle to the gentiles. No longer was Jacob the supplanter, but was now called Israel, the one who stood up to God.

Yet Jacob cried out to him, "Please, tell me YOUR name?" That question was never answered, but Jacob did receive a blessing. And that confirmed for Jacob the identity of him with whom he had been wrestling. He named that place Peniel, which means, "the face of God." And when the newly named Israel left, he walked away with a limp.

As he prepared to face his brother, Jacob had prayed to God for help. Instead of a warm and fuzzy answer, Jacob got jumped by a man hiding out in the reeds down by the river. Instead of assurance of a certain victory, he received a limp that would plague him the rest of his days. Instead of a motivational speech, he was forced to expose his true character in confession before God. But from this struggle he realized his own inner strength and ability to persevere in the face of danger, and he received a new identity and a blessing from God.

This story reminds us that God is not some heavenly grandparent, chuckling at our whimsy and dolling out silver dollars and patting us on our scruffy little heads. God is the Creator, the Sovereign Lord of everything seen and unseen. God doesn't fit into our pockets, nor conform to our agendas. The mystery of God's ways goes beyond what we can ever envision or

comprehend. Sometimes our prayers are answered with a miraculous reversal of circumstance. Other times our prayers are met with harsh reality and rough challenges.

When the miracle comes, our response is simple. Praise and thanksgiving flow easily. Joy replaces dread, and life is good again. But what happens those times we pray, and the mugger leaps out at us from the riverbank.

I remember a conversation I had with one of the deacons in Indianapolis. She was struggling with God. One day she had a book with her, and I asked what she was reading. I can't remember the exact title, but it was one of those books about how to deal with faith in God when bad things happen. Not long before her daughter had had a rough pregnancy. When the child was born, both mother and baby almost died. It was very hard time for the family, and they struggled with questions about faith and tried to understand why bad things happen. In the end, everything turned out okay. But that wasn't enough for the deacon.

For her it brought up all sorts of questions. Her grandbaby lived. But the baby in the next crib in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit did not live. She was so thankful that her family's prayers had been answered. But what about the baby that died. What about that family. Why weren't those prayers answered. We talked about it for a while. She said to me, "You know, I've always thought I had pretty strong faith, but this really just really made me wonder about some things." I could tell that she had some pretty hard questions. I could tell that she was wrestling with God and faith.

We want answers. We want things to make sense. We want faith to be some magical formula that will somehow tell us that everything will be alright in the end. And then we begin to fear when the questions do arise. We get a little scared when we find ourselves becoming angry with God when things don't go the way we expect them to. Sometimes we even think it's wrong to ask questions, that we should just sit back and say, "What will be, will be," and accept the hardships of life without a struggle, without any questions. But then when uncertainties occur, we get uncomfortable. And when the rough times come, so do the doubts.

We all struggle with God. We all have those experiences that bring us to the point of physical and emotional exhaustion. We pray for answers. We pray for wholeness. And instead of answers we get more questions. Instead of healing, we learn we must fight a little longer. Like Jacob, when we are completely exposed before God, vulnerable, we cry out for relief, for just a simple blessing, and eventually, after we have struggled for what seems an eternity, the morning light comes and the fight is over. In the end, we find we are stronger for having struggled; our lives have changed in some form or fashion. Yet along with this new identity, we may also exhibit a few battle scars.

There is nothing wrong with struggling with God, for asking and confronting the unanswerable questions. For it is in the wrestling that our faith matures. It is in the confrontation that our reliance upon God is refined. For Jacob, part of the blessing came in his realization that he had it

within himself to fight, to stand up to God. And in that action, he got his new name, he lived up to his God-given identity. We will probably come out of the struggle a bit battle worn, but perhaps we will come to see God more clearly in the process.

The fact is, all of us will be scarred at some point or another in this journey we call life. We have no choice in the matter. Life is like that. But we do have a choice in how we understand these moments of scarring when they do come. Will we, at the end of our lives, look back and lament the injustice and finitude of our creaturely existence, cursing the times of hardship that encroached upon our days?

Or will we instead allow the grace of God to embrace us, believing by faith, the same God who created the world also works for the redemption of the world. Redemption comes not despite the struggle but through the struggle. Christ himself fully understood the meaning of suffering and hardship. Jesus himself wrestled with God. It is then by faith that we can hear the words of Apostle Paul from the book of Romans, "All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose."

We don't have to have the answers. We don't have to know the reasons why. In the end the struggles we face do not have to be without meaning. They can be used by God for our growth and for God's redemptive purposes in this world.

In case you were wondering about Jacob's meeting with his brother the following day? Esau welcomed him home with open arms and a loving embrace. He greeted his brother with forgiveness and reconciliation.

What does it mean to wrestle with God? It means not backing down from the hard questions. It means not being afraid to confront God with our deepest fears. It means looking deep into the darkness and realizing that we may not come out of it unscathed. Faith isn't about having all the right answers. Faith is about our willingness to live with the ambiguity.